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Strengthening of the coordination of humanitarian and disaster relief assistance of the United Nations, including special economic assistance: strengthening of the coordination of emergency humanitarian assistance of the United Nations

Letter dated 14 August 2013 from the Secretary-General addressed to the President of the General Assembly

I have the honour to refer to General Assembly resolution 60/124, in which the Assembly established the Advisory Group for the Central Emergency Response Fund (CERF) to advise me on its use and impact. In accordance with the provisions of paragraph 21 of that resolution, I have the honour to transmit herewith a note of the meeting of the CERF Advisory Group, which took place in Geneva on 13 and 14 May 2013 (see annex).

As summarized in that note, the Advisory Group expressed appreciation for the continuing improvements in the performance and management of the Fund. The Group considered a number of policy issues, including an update on the management response plan to the five-year evaluation of CERF; recent efforts to improve the quality of narrative reporting and monitoring on the use of CERF funds; updates on the performance and accountability framework; the underfunded emergency window; and an update on the risk action plan of CERF.

The Group participated in a teleconference with the Deputy Controller and discussed the percentage of programme support costs of CERF retained by the Office of the Controller. They expressed their concerns that donor support for CERF might be reduced if a significant portion of their contribution is used to cover costs not related to humanitarian activities of the Fund.

The Group met with members of the Inter-Agency Standing Committee to discuss their progress in making timely disbursements from United Nations agencies and the International Organization of Migration to implementing partners. The participants from the Inter-Agency Standing Committee also addressed progress made in their agencies' evaluations of activities funded by CERF and reported that the Fund remains one of their biggest contributors to humanitarian emergency operations.

I should be grateful if you would bring this letter and its annex to the attention of the members of the General Assembly.

(*Signed*) **BAN** Ki-moon

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Annex

Note to the Secretary-General on the meeting of the Advisory Group of the Central Emergency Response Fund (13 and 14 May 2013)

Recommendations and conclusions

1. The Advisory Group of the Central Emergency Response Fund (CERF) was established by the General Assembly in its resolution 60/124 to advise the Secretary-General, through the Under-Secretary-General for Humanitarian Affairs, on the use and impact of the Fund. The Advisory Group's first meeting for 2013 was held in Geneva on 13 and 14 May and was chaired by Mikael Lindvall (Sweden).

2. The meeting was the members' first opportunity to interact with the Assistant Secretary-General and Deputy Emergency Relief Coordinator, Kyung-wha Kang, and the new chief of the CERF secretariat, Lisa Doughten. The Group met with the humanitarian coordinators of Mali, South Sudan and Yemen to discuss their experiences in coordinating and leading humanitarian responses and to share their perspectives on CERF and its impact in the field. The humanitarian coordinators commended CERF for the important role it plays in strengthening in-country coordination and supporting the functions, as well as bolstering the role, of humanitarian coordinators. The discussions touched upon a wide range of issues, including the appropriateness of interpreting CERF life-saving criteria more flexibly, the degree to which humanitarian coordinators can be held accountable for the use of CERF funds, the increased use of harmonized reporting and the continued importance of the timeliness of funding and forward disbursement. The humanitarian coordinators also highlighted the active and valuable participation of governments and national authorities following CERF allocations.

3. The Under-Secretary-General for Humanitarian Affairs and Emergency Relief Coordinator, Valerie Amos, briefed members on the use and management of the Fund during the first four months of 2013 and specifically highlighted its critical support for emergency response efforts in Mali and the Syrian Arab Republic.

4. The Advisory Group participated in a teleconference with the Deputy Controller regarding the percentage of CERF programme support costs retained by the Office of the Controller.

5. The Group had the opportunity to meet with partners from the Inter-Agency Standing Committee to discuss their progress in making timely disbursements from United Nations agencies and the International Organization of Migration (IOM) to implementing partners. They discussed the Standing Committee's experiences with reporting on CERF funds and how the Fund's recently revised reporting template complements the Standing Committee's efforts to harmonize reporting. Participants from the Standing Committee also addressed the progress that had been made in their agencies' evaluations of activities funded by CERF and reported that the Fund remains one of their biggest contributors to humanitarian emergency operations.

6. The Advisory Group considered policy issues, including an update on the management response plan to the five-year evaluation of CERF; recent efforts to improve the quality of narrative reporting and monitoring on the use of CERF funds; increased timeliness of disbursements by agencies and IOM of CERF funds to

implementing partners; updates on the performance and accountability framework and the 2013 country reviews, in accordance with the framework, of Burkina Faso, Niger and Senegal, and of the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Pakistan and Yemen; the underfunded emergency window of the Fund; CERF complementarity with country-based pooled funds; and an update on the Fund's risk action plan.

7. Further to those discussions, the Advisory Group would like to make the following observations and recommendations:

Management

8. During her briefing, the Emergency Relief Coordinator informed the Advisory Group that CERF disbursed nearly $485 million to 49 countries and territories in 2012. This marked the highest amount disbursed in a single year in the history of the Fund and reflected significant funding requests for life-saving operations in the Sahel, and in the Syrian Arab Republic and the neighbouring countries, as well as vital funding for underfunded, chronic crises. She also informed members that the resource mobilization strategy for CERF was being implemented with the goal of increasing funding consistency from a broader base of Member States. The Advisory Group expressed its appreciation to the Emergency Relief Coordinator and the secretariat for their use of funds and management of CERF.

9. The Advisory Group requested the secretariat to evaluate the advantages and disadvantages of limiting countries to a single allocation of support from the underfunded window per year. Noting that many of the current humanitarian crises are, in essence, protection crises, the Group requested the secretariat to substantiate how CERF funds assist protection activities. The Fund was recognized as playing a small yet significant role in facilitating resilience within emergency response activities through funding early action projects. The Group requested clarification on the roles and responsibilities of other humanitarian resilience actors and how CERF contributes to early action support resilience without expanding its mandate.

10. The secretariat was encouraged to explore the continued usefulness of the loan element given agencies' development and use of internal financing mechanisms and the diminishing number of loan requests. To help CERF further improve its transparency and accountability, the Advisory Group requested the secretariat to continue increasing the public visibility of donors' financial contributions. For the purpose of visibility and transparency, and in order to more accurately measure the Fund's impact and added value in the field, the secretariat was encouraged to work with agencies to ensure implementing partners are made more aware when CERF funds are financing their activities.

11. Members noted that humanitarian coordinators play an important role in facilitating field activities funded by CERF and requested the secretariat to continue strengthening coordinators' abilities to monitor and evaluate activities funded by CERF. The Group expressed support for the transformative agenda of the Inter-Agency Standing Committee and its importance for strengthening the role of humanitarian coordinators and humanitarian leadership, in general. It also encouraged host governments and local and international non-governmental organizations to be more involved in discussing the prioritization of activities, and, when appropriate, the preparation of CERF funding applications.

12. On the issue of the percentage of programme support costs retained by the Office of the Controller (60 per cent) and CERF (40 per cent), the Group expressed their appreciation for the discussion with the Deputy Controller. They expressed concerns that donor support for CERF could be reduced if a significant portion of their contributions is used to cover costs not related to the Fund's humanitarian activities. They requested that the Office of the Controller prepare a paper with disaggregated details on the Controller's use of CERF programme support costs and to participate in similar discussions at the next Advisory Group meeting, to be held in November 2013.

13. The Advisory Group recognized the Inter-Agency Standing Committee's efforts to improve the speed with which it disburses CERF funding to implementing partners and called upon the CERF secretariat and, in particular, agencies, to maintain efforts to expedite forward disbursements. The Group asked for further data on this crucial issue for the next meeting. The Group welcomed the plans of the World Food Programme and the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees to evaluate their use of CERF and other pooled funds, and asked the secretariat to encourage Standing Committee members to continue to perform their own evaluations of activities funded by CERF and to share feedback. Members requested the secretariat to seek further clarification on the recent decisions of the joint meeting of the Executive Boards of the United Nations Development Programme, the United Nations Population Fund, the United Nations Children's Fund and the United Nations Entity for Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women to increase their cost recovery rate from 7 per cent to 8 per cent and the potential impact on CERF. The Group expressed concerns around the possible disbanding of the Humanitarian Financing Working Group of the Standing Committee and requested the Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs to ensure that Standing Committee discussions of humanitarian financing issues continue in an appropriate forum.

14. The Group agreed to close the management response plan to the five-year evaluation of CERF in the fourth quarter of 2013, following its successful implementation. However, it called upon the secretariat to regularly update members on items that will be mainstreamed in the Fund's longer-term workplan. It asked the secretariat to explore the amount of funds that is carried over from the previous year and whether CERF should potentially reduce this amount through more allocations or greater amounts of funding to countries in need throughout the year. The Group welcomed the continued improvement in the narrative reporting of agencies' use of CERF funds and encouraged the secretariat to explore strategies within the umbrella letter of understanding to further improve narrative reporting.

15. With regard to the review of the performance and accountability framework, the Group expressed interest in discussing the final report at its next meeting and looked forward to receiving feedback from the reviews conducted in 2013 of the Sahel (with country missions to Burkina Faso, Niger and Senegal), the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Pakistan and Yemen. Members took note of the secretariat's review of the underfunded emergency window and its findings. The Group observed the importance of improving the accuracy of the Financial Tracking Service to support donors' needs and to strengthen agencies' abilities to more effectively report on their use of CERF funds.

16. The Group recognized that the harmonization of country-based pooled funds with CERF was a goal aimed at increasing the overall coherence, efficiency and effectiveness of humanitarian coordination and action. The Group encouraged the secretariat to emphasize and support the role humanitarian coordinators play in facilitating the process for better results. On the risk action plan, members expressed interest in learning more about the secretariat's efforts to combat agencies and implementing partners' potential mismanagement and the misuse of CERF funds. The Group requested CERF to discuss the possibility of allocating funds to programmes as well as projects at a future Advisory Group meeting. Towards that end, the Fund's secretariat agreed to circulate a paper from 2011 commissioned by the Inter-Agency Standing Committee Sub-Working Group on Humanitarian Financing on the programme-based approach.

Administrative matters

17. The Advisory Group expressed its support for the new chief of the Fund's secretariat. The Group elected Catherine Walker (Australia) as the new Chair and Mathewos Hunde Tulu (Ethiopia) as the Vice-Chair of the Advisory Group. The Group expressed its appreciation for the service of the outgoing Chair, Mikael Lindvall (Sweden) and Vice-Chair, Milton Rondo Filho (Brazil).